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AUTHOR Frazier, Orville P.
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ABSTRACT

The problems of a small district are very nearly the same as those of a large district. The best way the superintendent of a small district can cope with daily problems is to get a good board of education behind him, get the board involved, provide the board with good inservice programs, obtain good middle administrators, give principals full authority, pay principals well, get a good faculty, have teachers interviewed by and responsible to principals, and tell co-workers when they have done a good job and give them credit. (Author/IRT)

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
108th Annual Convention
Atlantic City, N.J. February 20-23, 1976

SPEAKER: Orville P. Frazier, Superintendent of Schools, Harlan, IA

TOPIC: Coping with Persistent Problems of the Small District Superintendency

PLACE: County Cork Room, Shelburne Hotel

TIME: 2:30 p.m., Friday, February 20

PROGRAM: Page 36

Summary of Remarks

The America most people have known in the past is gone forever. In its place is a highly complex, technically oriented society plagued with a multitude of serious and far reaching problems. Almost every part of our social and economic order has been affected in the recent years.

Earl Nightingale in his motivational tape "The Miracle of the Mind", states: "It is estimated of all the scientists in the history of the world, 90% are alive today.

"We have reached, in the area of ideas and human advancement, a plateau so high it was undreamed of by even the most optimistic forecaster as recent as 10 years ago.

"Every new idea triggers additional ideas so that now we are in an era of compounding advancement on every front and in every area that almost staggers the imagination."

Kenneth Boulding, an outstanding economist and social thinker, asserts that the present moment is a crucial point in human history. He states, "As far as many statistical series related to activities of mankind are concerned, the date that divides human history into two equal parts is well within living memory. In effect, our century represents THE GREAT MEDIAN STRIP running down the center of human history. The world of today is as different from the world in which I was born as that world was from Julius Caesar's. I was born in the middle of human history, to date, roughly. Almost as much has happened since I was born as happened before."

Toffler, in his book "Future Shock" states, "It has been observed, that if the last 50,000 years of man's existence were divided into lifetimes of approximately sixty-two years each, there have been about 800 such lifetimes. Of these 800, fully 650 were spent in caves.

"Only during the last seventy lifetimes has it been possible to communicate effectively from one lifetime to another— as writing made it possible to do. Only during the last six lifetimes did masses of men ever see a printed word. Only during the last four has it been possible to measure time with any precision. Only in the last two has anyone anywhere used an electric motor. And the overwhelming majority of all the material goods we use in daily life today have been developed within the present, the 800th, lifetime."

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The past half century has virtually taken us from the days of the horse and buggy to the miracles of the laser beams, television, salk vaccine, walks on the moon and unbelievable lifesaving operations such as heart and kidney transplants.

Our society is very mobile: Giant factories close and reopen, entire industries disappear from our economic scene, and massive migration of our people take place. This necessitates the need for new occupations and training unheard of just five years ago. A student graduating from a secondary school will need to be retrained from seven to ten times in a lifetime.

Inflation is running rampant and erodes the buying power and savings of the aged, creating problems for that age group as well as for those to whom they must turn for help.

Our almost unpredictable, and at times unstable, economy surprises us each day. Buying on credit, used only sparingly twenty-five years ago, is now a way of life. The cities which once stood as jewels in our crown, such as New York and San Francisco, are near bankruptcy. The consumer pays more and more for each item and is more dependent upon our system to manufacture or produce almost everything we use.

Gasoline which once sold for ten cents per gallon, now sellsregularly in some parts of our country for 75¢.

The consumer's ability to pay, coupled with a seemingly unquenchable thirst for the good life is placing gigantic demands on our diminishing resources. Now the very air we breathe and the water we depend on for life seem to be on the endangered list.

Divorce and suicide rates continue to rise, mental illness is at an all time high, and drugs and alcohol are a serious problem in nearly all age levels.

Crimes such as burglary, rape and murder are up 18% over a year ago, and corruption has now reached the offices of the vice-president and president of the United States.

School systems in America have been affected as much as any institution on America's changing scene. Once a quiet profession far from the problems of the world, education is now in the mainstream of public life. Both the public and the people within the profession saw the need for our school system to get in step with the times.

If we are to prepare our youth for the real world, it is essential for schools to change from the one-room country school concept to modern laboratories of learning.

There is no one patent answer to school problems. People and their needs differ in every part of the country. For that matter, needs differ within a school system and even within a single classroom.

The increasingly migratory nature of our population with multi-lingual problems makes the matter of education even more challenging.

Schools are feeling the impact of numerous forces, heretofore, believed unlikely in education. Strikes by teacher groups are frequent, and noncertified employees are well organized as well. Taxpayers' associations and other powerful political groups crowd board rooms at meeting time. These forces reach far beyond the board room and into the legislatures and congressional chambers.

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The impact of all this now reaches into every corner of our country and has affected almost every institution in the American dream. Now, more than ever before, America needs its educational system. In order for this system to function in an efficient manner, we need courageous, strong, dependable, intelligent, and far-sighted leadership. The pressures of power politics have created many new and challenging problems for the school superintendent. At a time when the office needs stability, direction, and programs with continuity-programs in which the people have faith-the turnover in the office of the superintendency is very high.

The tenure of the average superintendent is about four to five years per each position.

When one considers the fact that some school executives have been in the same position from 10 to 20 years, it is apparent that many must serve far less than the four to five year average. This kind of tenure does not permit the long range planning and continuity necessary for good schools.

HOW TO COPE WITH DAY TO DAY PROBLEMS IN THE SMALL SCHOOL.

In 1974 A.A.S.A. asked E.R.S. to conduct a study or an opinions pole on the items which school administrators consider to be most crucial.

Sixty seven percent of those who took the time to respond were from suburban or rural schools. The respondents rated the problem in this order:

1. Adequate school finance.
2. Cost reduction.
3. Dismissal of incompetent staff.
4. Evaluating instructional programs.
5. Evaluating teachers.
6. Curriculum planning.
7. Evaluating administrators.
8. Accountability.
9. Collective negotiations.
10. Time management.
11. Planning & setting goals.
12. Management by objective.
13. Inservice training.
14. Obtaining information for decision making.
15. Budgeting and accounting.

The majority of school systems in the state of Iowa are small. We have 450 school districts in Iowa with about 90% of those having less than 3,000 students.

Harlan (the district in which I work), has around 3200 students, K through 12.

When asked to speak here I thought it would be interesting to compare the top problems of Iowa with the national ranking referred to earlier.

I sent letters to friends in schools of various sizes and the results were as follows:

1. School finance.
2. Public relations.
3. Collective bargaining.
4. Transportation.
5. Lack of administrative staff.

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6. Paper work.
7. Dwindling enrollment.
8. Curriculum.
9. Student discipline.
10. Personnel problems.
11. Extra curricular activities.
12. Special education.

In my brief survey I did not send out a list but instead asked my friends to list the top ten problems in order of importance. I believe it is significant that without a list which might be suggestive, there was a great deal of similarity between the ranking of problems.

Now to the matter of coping with these problems.—

The ideas presented here are my own. I do not suggest that you should copy them but I can say they have worked for us.

One of my friends in Iowa put it this way: the problem in the small schools are about the same as those in the large school but the superintendent is nearer the trenches.

Personally I believe this is good because we are not able to insulate ourselves from the people. We are more involved personally.

If you can accept this statement one could ask: how can one man be an expert on everything. The answer of course, is you can't. If that is true, how do you cope with those everyday problems?

One of the important factors necessary to success is good administrative leadership.

It is, however, important for we administrators to realize that leadership is not the only factor. There are even some cases (though rare) where programs are good in spite of administration.

If we can't be an expert on everything where do we turn for help?

I do not want this to appear to be an oversimplification, because it is not, finding leadership is not easy. But I believe a school can only become as good as we are willing to let it become.

If we set a negative tone, if we resist any change, if we must personally take credit for every good and popular act and fail to recognize the involvement of others and credits due, we will most certainly squelch good leadership potential within our staff.

I firmly believe there is within the most humble member of our staff a resource of leadership and talent undreamed of by even the most optomistic among us.

Getting them to release it is another matter. Some are not willing to take the risk.

But there are risks in this plan for the administrator as well. For example, what if the person from whom you seek help wants to go off in directions which differ from those you believe in?

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I believe in hiring a principal giving him full latitude to run his building. That kind of authority is always accompanied by a large measure of responsibility. A responsibility to lead and to encourage leadership within each building.

If a superintendent of schools hires a person to be principal and treats this person as a "Bat Boy" capable of handling only the trivia, expect nimimal contribution from these people.

If your principals are treating staff members as if they are barely adequate to fill the job, more than likely these staff members will live up to these expectations.

What I have really tried to say is: if we properly develop our staff with which we work, these people will minimize the number of day to day problems we face. Tell a man to make a decision and then fail to back him, you are in trouble.--

What about school board-superintendent relations?

A community usually gets the kind of board they deserve or want and the board in turn usually gets the kind of superintendent they want and deserve.

I know there are communities that are tough to work in and tough to work for. But I believe that life, and a job for that matter, is about what we want to make it.

I wish we could purge from our ranks those superintendents who are constantly complaining about what an impossible job we have. I have failed to find a single time when setting around complaining about a problem has served any good purpose.

I am painfully aware that we have some challenging problems--and that we are living in trying times, but we are not the first profession forced to work under pressure.

Chinese Story--Pioneers--Disease--Crop Failure--Indian Floods--

How to work with a board. I have never had a board member who was not genuinely interested in schools and in helping people. I have had many who have disagreed with me. They should--superintendents are not always right. They should always vote their convictions and if those convictions differ with mine they have a responsibility to vote against me.

I have heard administrators say they can't get the board interested in the school. I believe the board has to be involved in the programs of the school. Not in an administrative capacity but in a supportive way. In policy making--in creating--in supporting--in study--in P.R.

How do you get them involved? By sending them to workshops, state and national conventions of all sorts and all at taxpayers expense. Education is big business, we can't afford uninformed board members.

Harlan has seven board members. All seven attended the State School Board Convention this year and all seven will attend a national meeting of some sort by the end of the year. Two of my bosses are in this meeting, three will go to San Francisco in April, one went to Tuscon in January and one to Memphis in December.

These people come back to our board meetings ready to move. They have talked with administrators and board members and have a good background for the job.

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Our board meets on the 2nd and 4th Monday of each month. On Thursday prior to each board meeting each board member receives a packet of materials.

This packet contains:
The bills.
The minutes of the previous meeting.
The financial statements of all types including extra curricular activities.

The agenda for the meeting and all possible information available on each subject. A board member is a lot more willing to make a decision if he has adequate information and has time to think about the alternative.

I believe the superintendent has a responsibility to take a stand on every issue before the board. The superintendent has no right to pass the buck onto the board by saying an issue does not matter to him.

We use teachers in our board meetings. Not only does it help the relationship between the board and teachers but it improves the image and the self-image of teachers. It is a way of saying, this teacher is a leader and he or she is here to help present this project to the board. On occasions the teacher makes the entire presentation.

It helps the board to realize that this problem is being attacked by the entire staff and is not just some wild fantasy of administration.

Respect for an administrator by a board of education must be earned. It will be gained or destroyed over a period of time by the way we perform. If our advice gets the board burned repeatedly, they lose faith.

Board members are not afraid to face tough problems but they have a right to have all the facts laid out before them clearly and plainly. Administrators should apprise the board of the various consequences along with the recommendations and the reasons for these recommendations.

Never be less than completely honest with a board. Leaving out a fact may gain an immediate advantage but in the long run the fact will come out. When it does, and it will, the board can only assume you did not do your homework well or you hid one of the facts. In either case the administrator will slip a little in esteem.

The best way to cope with daily problems:
A. Get a good board behind you.
B. Get the board involved.
C. Provide the board with a good inservice program.
D. Provide good middle administrators.
E. Give their principals full authority.
F. Pay your principals well.
G. Get a good faculty.
H. Teachers should be interviewed by principals and be responsible to the principal.
I. When your co-workers do a good job tell them so and give them credit.

Now to what happened to the home court advantage:

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We are now living in a new era in schools as well as the rest of the world.

In affect it is a new legal ball park and the home crowd isn't always friendly.

Unfortunately many superintendents and many board members have been slow to recognize the changing scene.

Don't for a minute get the idea that I believe boards of education are obsolete or powerless. They certainly are not.

There are boards which have failed in their "Human Relations." They have treated employees as if they were poor white trash. They have done little to develop a program of good employee relations, some individual board members still have the idea they should run the school much like it was done in the small country school. It will not work.

Employees are more worldly today, they are better trained and perhaps most importantly they are better organized than ever before.

They are demanding and getting a right to share in the decisions which affect them:

Salaries
Certain board policies--and now firing procedures.

The problems do not end with employees--students and parents are demanding the right to greater say on those matters which affect the students.

The best advice I can give a board is hire a good superintendent, pay him a good salary and try to keep him around long enough to develop some programs.

Support him further by providing enough administrative help and reward these people with good salaries.

After you hire good people you must provide them with added training to keep up with the times. Don't expect a superintendent to be on top of the burning issues of the day if you haven't sent him to workshops on the current problems.

And don't expect him to pay for it out of his own pocket.

Questions ----------

Fire away ----------

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